



Blacks in Early Florida

A Different View



The institution of slavery in Spain was different from that in other European nations. Spanish slave codes, granting slaves certain rights and protections, were derived from the Justinian Code and had been incorporated into Castilian law in the thirteenth century by King Alfonso X. As African slaves reached Spain in the fifteenth century, they fell under this legislation known as the *Siete Partidas*.

When Spanish explorers came to the New World, enslaved native peoples and Africans also fell under this act which formed a body of law that held that slavery was against natural law, for God had created man free. This philosophy was held in the context of a country steeped in religious righteousness.

The Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabelle, were very concerned about the souls of their subjects. This applied most importantly to the Indies and Spanish Florida. Slaves, Native Americans, and free men were brothers in Christ, and it was the responsibility of masters and the Church to teach them the rudiments of the faith so that they might be admitted into the Church and enjoy all its sacraments.

Since the sacraments include marriage, the sanctity of the family was protected by requirements that family members not be separated. Brotherhood in the Church sometimes served to tie masters to slaves in intricate kinship arrangements, such as when owners served as godparents and marriage sponsors for their slaves, or when a free man married a slave woman.

Africans Come to Florida

When Pedro Menéndez established St. Augustine, black slaves accompanied him. They worked on early fortifications, sawed timber, and built several structures, including a church, a blacksmith shop, and an artillery platform. They also cleared land for planting and harvested the crops.

In October 1687, the first known fugitive slaves from Carolina arrived in St. Augustine. Governor Diego de Quiroga dutifully reported to Spain that eight males, two females, and a three-year-old nursing child had made good their escape in a boat. Six of the men were put to work in the Castillo but two others were assigned to work with the blacksmith, a possible indication that they already had skills in that area. The women became domestics in the house of the governor. All were paid for their labor.

When an English official arrived the next fall to claim them, Governor Quiroga refused to release them on the grounds that they had been converted to Catholicism, had married into the town, and were usefully employed. Thus a fugitive slave policy began to evolve in the Florida colony. In 1693 King Charles II issued the first official position on the runaways, "giving liberty to all...the men as well as the women...so that by their example and by my liberality others will do the same."

A Free Black Town

Over the years more African slaves escaped from the Carolinas and found refuge in Spanish Florida. In 1738 Florida Governor Manuel de Montiano granted these blacks a plot of land about two miles north of St. Augustine where they could build their own settlement and fort. The people became Catholics and adopted Spanish names and Spanish culture with an African flavor. This settlement, Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, or Fort Mose, (Mo-say) became the first free black settlement in North America.

The fort was described as an earthen-walled fort with Indian-type thatched huts. The community housed thirty-eight men and their families with an estimated population of about one hundred people, governed by an African Mandingo leader named Francisco Menéndez. When Fort Mose was destroyed by the British in 1740, the people escaped to St. Augustine. The settlement was rebuilt in 1752. When Florida became British by treaty in 1763, these African settlers went to Cuba with the rest of the Spanish from St. Augustine.

Social Position

While slavery in the Spanish colonies was considered an accident of fate rather than a perpetual or preordained condition, and Spanish slave code and social practice made it possible for a significant free black class to exist in both Spain and the New World, blacks were not free from racial prejudice. When the Moors, who had ruled Spain for seven centuries, were finally driven out in 1492, the Moors who remained were relegated to the bottom of the social status. This was to remain the norm for centuries, although a person could climb the social ladder through marriage, the accumulation of wealth, military service, or the sponsorship of a person of higher status.

Although the majority of blacks married others of African descent, many of them married whites, Indians, and mixed-blood mates. Thus, a multi-racial and multi-ethnic society quickly emerged through-out Florida, as well as Latin America and the Caribbean. The Spanish developed a highly organized system for identifying the precise genetic heritage of an individual. Full blood Africans were known as *Morenos*. People of mixed African-European-Indian ancestry were known as *Castas* with other nomenclature de-pending on their heritage. For example, if a Spaniard married a *Morena* woman, their children would be *Mulatto*. If a *Mulatto* married a person of Spanish blood, their children would be known as *Morisco*.

Blacks in the Military



Like their white counterparts, one place where a person of lesser status could succeed was in the military. Blacks served in their own units under their own black officers. There were black militia units almost everywhere the Spanish had colonies, even in the Philippines.

In Florida, black inhabitants had formed themselves into a militia at least as early as 1683. Black troops from Vera Cruz and Havana served in Florida during the War of Jenkins' Ear (1739-1742). During the American Revolution, black Havana troops under Spanish Louisiana governor Bernardo de Gálvez successfully attacked the British at Baton Rouge, Manchac, Mobile, and Pensacola.

According to St. Augustine historian Dr. Susan Parker, the Fort Mose militia was routinely stationed at the Francisco Redoubt, the south-easternmost cannon platform along the earthen city walls. It is possible that they were also rotated as a group to Fort Matanzas on occasion. It is known that one of the soldiers present at the last muster held at Fort Matanzas five days before the formal transfer to the US in 1821 was Sergeant 2nd Class Lorenzo Brito of the Colored Company of Havana.

Free blacks had a vested interest in serving in the Florida military. After all, if Florida fell to the British, they would be enslaved. But even slaves were eager to serve because it meant a possible route to manumission.

Changing Times

In 1821 the Adams-Onís Treaty ceded Florida to the United States. Although this treaty recognized the rights of free blacks and persons of color, most of the black militia and their families moved to Cuba. Only those blacks who felt themselves protected by owning substantial property stayed in the new territory.

However, soon laws were passed infringing on these rights. Laws limited the right of free blacks to assembly, carry firearms, serve on juries or testify against whites. Free blacks were taxed unfairly and subject to curfews. They could be whipped for misdemeanors, impressed for manual labor, and even forced back into slavery to satisfy debts or fines. Inter-racial marriage was prohibited, and the children of such previous marriages could not inherit their parents' estates.

Some free blacks who ran afoul of these restrictive laws ran away to live with the Seminole Indians where they were hunted down and sold into slavery. Those who could afford it immigrated to other Caribbean countries. Although by 1850 it is estimated that about 1000 free blacks remained in Florida (compared to 39,000 slaves), it was clear that the new society would be composed of two castes only--free whites and enslaved blacks.

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